Voltaire, Historian

Voltaire, Historian

Thou shalt not commit anachronism: that injunction can be taken as the first commandment among historians today. Not so in the eighteenth century. From Giannone to Gibbon, historians expected their work to teach lessons that would be relevant to the concerns of their contemporaries. Voltaire outdid them all, not only in the scale of his narratives but also in the morals he drew from them. In his Essai sur les moeurs he surveyed the history of humanity going back to ancient China; and the closer he got to his main subject, Europe since the time of Charlemagne, the more he delighted in exposing the barbarity of the past as if it were an argument against abuses in the present.

The Essai sur les moeurs, recently republished by the Voltaire Foundation in seven large volumes, occupied Voltaire for most of his adult life. He wrote it and rewrote it, touching up the text in edition after edition, from 1740 until a few months before his death in 1778. It began as a kind of experiment, which would demonstrate the philosophical interest of history to his mistress, Emilie Du Châtelet, who preferred the more challenging field of Newtonian physics while they shared her château in Cirey near Lunéville. Mme Du Châtelet, who died in 1749, also served as an intermediary for all of Voltaire's subsequent readers. In his preface, which he addressed to her, he explained that he would select instructive material from the endless record of the past and that he expected her to read it "as a philosopher" ("en philosophe"). The same relation between writer and reader animated his Philosophie de l'histoire (1764): "You [Mme Du Châtelet] wish that philosophers had written ancient history, because you want to read it as a philosopher. You seek only useful truths. » Philosophical engagement animates all of Voltaire's historical works, and conversely, history informed most of his philosophical writing. Treatises like the Dictionnaire philosophique and Questions sur l'Encyclopédie echo many passages from the Essai sur les moeurs. History, Voltaire told Mme Du Châtelet, was "a vast warehouse, where you will take whatever is useful to you. »

Yet Voltaire set another, more ambitious goal for himself in the Essai sur les moeurs. He would not bore the reader with details about obscure kings and

queens, he promised in the preface. Instead, he would concentrate on « the spirit, mores, and customs of the principal nations » ("l'esprit, les moeurs, les usages des nations principales." « Mœurs » in eighteenth-century French had two meanings, both defined succinctly by the Dictionnaire de l'Académie française at a time when Voltaire was a member of the Academy. The first and presumably preferred definition concerned morality: "habits, natural or acquired, tending toward good or evil." The second suggests something close to what we now consider cultural anthropology: "refers also to the way of life, to the inclinations, customs, ways of doing things and particular laws of each nation." Voltaire worked within the area demarcated by the second definition. He had already done so in Le Siècle de Louis XIV (1751), which began chronologically where Essai sur les moeurs (first full edition,1756) ended. Taken together, these two works represented a radical new vision of the past. They include topics outside the range of other histories: dress, family life, trade, the daily activities of ordinary people, who scurry about like ants, unnoticed by the great and by the chroniclers of great events: "Artisans and shopkeepers, who are hidden by their obscurity from the ambitious fury of the great, are ants, who dig habitations in silence, while the eagles and vultures tear each other apart." Voltaire promised to inform the reader about the ants as well as the eagles.

The attempt to see history « from below » has prevailed to such an extent since the 1950s that it is difficult to appreciate the originality of Voltaire's vision as he developed it in the 1740s. He did not do research in the manner of a modern historian. Rather than digging into archives, he quarried material from other histories and a few primary sources, notably the Bible. Thanks to its scholarly apparatus, the edition of the Voltaire Foundation makes it possible to follow the process of selection and therefore to appreciate the way Voltaire built up a picture of moeurs in distant societies and earlier centuries. Read back and forth between the text and the notes, and you can watch Voltaire's historical imagination at work.

But be prepared for disappointment. Voltaire did not fully realize the broad cultural and global history that he set out to write. Both the Essai sur les moeurs and Le Siècle de Louis XIV contain more about battles, dynasties, and the fortunes of the great than about the folkways of common men and women. Yet even in narrative mode, Voltaire's writing of history set him apart from most of his contemporaries, because he was less concerned with describing events than with

understanding their long-term effects. What, he asked, was their influence on moeurs and thus on the general progress of civilization?

To put the issue this way was to orient history in a new direction and also to redirect the contemporary discourse on moeurs. (It should be noted that the noun "civilisation" had not yet come into common usage. The Dictionnaire de l'Académie française recognized only the verb, "civiliser": "…to rendre civil, decent and sociable; to polish les moeurs. » In discussing subjects later identified with civilization, Voltaire favored a term that no longer has such a broad meaning: "politesse") While Voltaire was preparing his two great histories, the world of letters was shaken by the first of several scandals that dramatized the Enlightenment's emergence in the public sphere. On May 6, 1748, the Parlement of Paris condemned Les Moeurs, a philosophic treatise by François-Vincent Toussaint, to be lacerated and burned by the public hangman for offences against the Christian religion. The book soon went through thirteen editions, leaving Paris abuzz about the audacity of this new breed of writers, the philosophes. Voltaire had set the style, and Toussaint conformed to it. Les Moeurs subordinated ethics to secular concerns, arguing for reason, decency, and tolerance in a world where the sophisticated elite could get along nicely without Jesuit confessors and a punishing, Christian God. Toussaint's book was thoroughly Voltairean, yet it treated its subject in a conventional manner, according to the preferred definition of the dictionary, while Voltaire was rethinking history as the evolution of customs, manners, and values.

The originality of Voltaire's conception stands out if measured against the rather flat and worldly observations in Les Moeurs, but it looks less impressive if compared with another book that appeared in 1748, De l'Esprit des lois. The full title of Voltaire's work, Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations suggests the pertinence of the comparison, because--without saying so explicitly, although the final chapter of the last volume makes his target clear—Voltaire attempted to outdo Montesquieu. He would understand esprit on a grand scale, not merely in connection with laws but as the fundamental character of countries everywhere in the world, beginning with China and India. Now that global history has become a dominant trend among historians, Voltaire's invitation to Mme Du Châtelet—"Let's go over the globe together"—looks prophetic. But the chapters on Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas provide only quick overviews, derived in large part

from travel literature. When he discussed France and England, Voltaire had to contend with the challenge of Montesquieu's ideas.

He disagreed with most of them: the nature of despotism, government in the Orient, government in England, the separation of powers, the importance of climate, the role of the French parlements (superior law courts), the origin of the nobility and its contribution to political liberty, and the positive force exercised by intermediary bodies of all kinds in restraining royal power. Two philosophes grappling with fundamental problems of history and political science: they make a fascinating contrast. It can be reduced to a formula: the thèse royale (Voltaire), which favored reforms by a powerful, enlightened monarchy, versus the thèse nobiliaire (Montesquieu), which favored constitutional constraints on royal power.

Although that comparison is valid as far as it goes, it fails to do justice to Montesquieu's analysis of political systems. True, he abhorred the abuse of power under Louis XIV and the Regency, having followed events from his position as a president in the Parlement of Bordeaux. But far from being a conservative apologist for the parlements, he attempted to understand different political systems objectively, rather as a scientist studied the mechanisms of nature. He concentrated on the interaction of their moving parts and the principles or driving forces that made them function. Climate was but one of many factors that determined the "general spirit" ("esprit général") of a polity, according to Montesquieu. Monarchies were moved by the principle of honor, a sociological phenomenon that, at bottom, consisted of "the prejudice of each person and of each rank" in contrast to the principle that powered republics: virtue or the spirit of civic engagement as Machiavelli had understood it and as it would later be understood by Rousseau. Voltaire did not comprehend spirit as a force in history, whether among the crusaders or the Roundheads and the Shiites or the Sunnis. He had no ear for it, neither in its religious nor its revolutionary form. But he had a great supply of bons mots, and so he dismissed Montesquieu's work as "wit about the laws" ("de l'esprit sur les lois)."

The limitations to Voltaire's understanding of spirit show through his interpretation of the English Civil War, Protectorate, and Restoration in chapters 179-182 of the Essai sur les moeurs. Like Montesquieu, he admired the English variety of liberty, but he did not link it to the independence of the judiciary or the

separation of powers. For him, the English constitution had a healthy blend of power derived from the monarchy, the peerage, and the commoners—provided the crown was strong enough. When Charles I lost his grip on power, things fell apart; and a truly destructive force, "the spirit of Calvinism," precipitated a collapse into barbarism. Voltaire did not explain the nature of this "esprit," and he did not work out its influence on the course of events. He deplored the execution of the king, the spread of ideas about social equality, and the bloodshed. But he did not sort out events into a clear narrative. Instead, he emphasized their effects on culture. Thanks in large part to the theatre of Shakespeare and "Benjonson," England had been shedding its savagery: "Spirits became polished, enlightened." But the explosion of religious fanaticism plunged the country into a state of darkness that horrified Voltaire's esthetic as well as his political sensitivity. His description of the Puritans shows how far he was from anticipating the anthropological approach to history that is widely used today:

> …Their dress, their speech, their simple-minded allusions to passages in the Bible, their contortions, their sermons, their prophecies, everything about them would have been worthy, in a quieter age, of being ridiculed on the stages of the fairs in London, if that farce had not been too disgusting. Unfortunately, however, the absurdity of those fanatics was coupled with fury. The very men who would have been objects of mockery to children spread terror while bathing in blood; they were at the same time the most insane and the most redoubtable of all men.

Voltaire expressed some sympathy for Cromwell, both for imposing order and for rising to a position of absolute power from obscure origins. Then he noted with satisfaction that England regained civility and stability under the Restoration (never mind 1688, just around the corner), thanks to Charles II, a philosophe on the throne; a frenchified court; the flourishing of literature and the sciences (Milton went unmentioned, just as Rembrandt failed to make it into the chapter on Holland in the seventeenth century); and "more sociable moeurs."

Voltaire made the same points in the other chapters of the final volume, which he used as an opportunity to take stock of the progress reached in all the nations of Europe and Asia. When surveying Europe, he traced the balance of

power in the emerging system of states. As he had explained in the previous volume, the end of the religious wars and the establishment of the Bourbon dynasty had made France the dominant power. Spain had sunk into decadence, owing to weak rulers, the Inquisition, underdeveloped trade, and a lack of "the healthy philosophy"—that is, the Enlightenment. Germany had reverted to barbarism and fanaticism during the Thirty Years War. Its weakness and that of Spain created a power vacuum in Italy, which made it possible for the arts to continue to flourishing in the small Italian states. (As one measure, Voltaire noted that there were 160 statues in Florence and two in Paris, both of them made in Italy.) Holland suffered from unintelligible theological disputes, which occasionally produced bloodshed, but its commerce thrived. Denmark and Sweden also enjoyed healthy trade, a requisite for civilized moeurs. Poland had a promising population of theists but a weak, elective monarchy, which, as explained in the later editions, would lead to the first Partition (1772). Russia also suffered from instability until Peter the Great took things in hand. Before he initiated the civilizing process, ignorance and serfdom made Russia's political struggles degenerate into a farce, as Voltaire illustrated with a long account of the six false tsars named Dmitri. The extravagant anecdotes and succession of atrocities all pointed to the same conclusion: "How slowly and with what difficulty does humanity become civilized and society perfect itself. »

That observation assumed that a process of perfectibility, however uneven, was at work in history. When his global gaze took in the Asiatic countries, the moral of the story became clearer. Far from being a despotism, as Montesquieu claimed, and unlike France, the Ottoman empire promoted religious toleration and did not finance its wars with ruinous taxation. Persia, which Montesquieu also had misrepresented as a despotism, enjoyed flourishing arts, gentle moeurs, and a philosophy that by the seventeenth century had reached about the same stage of development as "our own." Moreover, "…the rights of humanity flourished there as in no other monarchy." In seventeenth-century India, the Moguls had established the most powerful monarchy in the world—not a despotism, but a well-run state (despite the regrettable lack of an effective law of succession to the throne) in which Delhi had grown to be larger than Paris and the peasants, unlike many in Europe, were free from serfdom. Best of all was China, where the emperor ruled with the help of philosophic Mandarins, and the population

prospered, free from the kinds of taxes that produced such misery in Europe. Although committed to religious toleration, the emperor wisely expelled all Christian missionaries, who were sure to produce disorder. The Japanese went further. After identifying Christianity as the greatest threat to the state, they drove out all foreigners and allowed only a few Dutch traders to operate from an offshore enclosure. At this point, having covered so much of the globe, Voltaire finally stopped, limiting himself to a final observation. Bread and wine did not exist in most countries of the world, and therefore it was difficult in Asia, Africa, and America to celebrate "the mysteries of our religion." After that sentence, a penultimate paragraph began: "Cannibals are much rarer than is commonly believed.» World history ended with a joke that had made the rounds of libertine circles in Paris since the beginning of the century.

The ending provided a symmetrical effect to the entire work, for the Essai sur les moeurs had begun with ancient China, and the chapters on modern China and Japan brought it to a close. Did this broad, book-end way of situating the central narrative about Europe convey a message that relativized the importance of European civilization? By emphasizing the superiority of the Chinese at the beginning of the story, Voltaire certainly put the pretentions of Europeans into an unaccustomed and uncomfortable perspective. In the end, however, he noted that the Chinese and other distant peoples had succumbed to "softness." The Europeans, and especially the French, had caught up with them and left them behind.

The course of history as surveyed in the Essai sur les moeurs therefore confirmed the judgment expressed in Le Siècle de Louis XIV. There were four great ages: Periclean Athens, Augustan Rome, Renaissance Italy, and Louisquatorzean France. The pattern revealed progress, for the France of Louis XIV was the greatest of all. Where did China, India, and Persia figure in that view? It had no room for them. In fact, despite some remarkably well-informed details about the history of Eastern civilizations, Voltaire never took his eye off Europe. Even while relating the glories of Ottoman and Chinese emperors, he was talking about the French. The distant countries had some interest in themselves, but they served primarily as a screen on which to project criticism of conditions in the West, above all France. For all its globalism, therefore, Voltaire's vision of history was fundamentally Eurocentric. And despite its extraordinary sweep—nine

centuries with deviations even deeper into time—it also remained presentist in orientation.

Yes, then, Voltaire can be convicted of anachronism, but the accusation is misplaced. More than any other writer, he was a man of his time. He shaped his time; he set its tone; he made philosophie into a force and set it to work, correcting ignorance and injustice. To accuse Voltaire of anachronism is anachronistic in itself, for the Essai sur les moeurs should not be read as an early version of the "cultural turn" in historiography. It should be read as an epic indictment of intolerance, superstition, bigotry, cruelty, and barbarism. Behind its wit is passion. The passion stands out especially in the later editions, when Voltaire wielded his pen as an angry old man and poured all his energy into the fight against l'infâme—the infamous thing, religious fanaticism. But it is there from the beginning, notably in the Histoire des croisades, published separately in 1740.

In chapter 197, his final summing up, Voltaire looks back over the nine centuries and asks what history teaches. He sees more darkness than light: suffering compounded by crime, much of it visited on humanity by religious fanatics, especially Christians and particularly popes—"at times assassins, at times assassinated, in turn poisoners and empoisoned, enriching their bastards and issuing decrees against fornication…." Yet despite their abuses, their bizarre ceremonies, and their theological absurdities, all religions teach the same essential morality: be just and treat others charitably. In the long run, this universal ethic will prevail. In France, it already is prevailing, however imperfectly, impelled by another constant among all human beings: the desire for order. Great rulers everywhere have pushed back the forces of anarchy. Compare France under Charlemagne with France under Louis XIV, and the trajectory is clear: greater stability, increased prosperity, growth in population, and the blossoming of culture. Therefore, despite the horrors chronicled over 196 chapters, the Essai sur les moeurs comes to a happy ending.

Robert Darnton